

A SAD STORY OF POETIC JUSTICE AND GANGRENE

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The hand of God acts in mysterious ways. As *Candide* well knew, this is the best of all possible worlds, but men's behavior still can be vile! Divine retribution is never far behind, as Jean Baptiste Lully discovered, to his regret. Jean Baptiste Lully was born 28 November 1632 in Florence, Italy, the son and grandson of millers. He had no formal education but taught himself to play the guitar and the violin.

While playing with strolling musicians at a carnival, his attention was attracted by a monk who encouraged him to emigrate to France. There he became a chamber boy of a young lady of nobility and helped teach her Italian. He was exposed to the best in French music and dance of that time, which became models for his own compositions in later years.

His talents attracted the attention of Louis XIV (the Sun king). On 23 February 1653 the 20-year-old Lully and the 14 year old Louis danced in the same ballet (the ballet *D'laNuit*, the Ballet of the Night) for the first time. Lully precipitously climbed the social and professional ladder over the next several years. With the untimely death of Cardinal Mazarin in March, 1661, and the death of Cambert, he was appointed chief musician of the King's Court.

As he climbed the social ladder, he displayed displeasure with his humble origins by several different means. First, he married Madeleine Lambert (socially much above him). He also changed the legal spelling of his name from Lulli—a name suggestive of Italian derivation to Lully, a more euphonious, more French sort of name! Their marriage document was signed by Louis XIV and his Queen, Anne, as well as the Minister Colbert and his wife. This was an early symbol of his power at the court. On his naturalization papers, he eliminated any mention of his humble origins as a son of a miller and stated that he was the son of a gentleman of Florence!

He could be a ruthless competitor. In 1659 Perrin and Cambert had established an opera house, the first in Paris, by royal patent. There was mismanagement financially; Cambert fled to London and Perrin was actually thrown in prison for debt. Lully turned the situation to his



own advantage by buying the patent of management from Perrin and taking over the opera house. In effect, he then controlled musical performances throughout France and was ruthless in promoting this to his own advantage.

Throne stood behind him even in arguments with such distinguished people as Moliere. He became impatient with anyone else attempting to exercise musical prerogatives. At one time he even broke a violin over the back of one of his errant musicians. In an ordinance he forbade the use of music in even marionette theatres.

Thus, the rise of a sometimes tyrant; the downfall of this tyrant had a certain symmetry about it. In the early days, orchestras had no conductor. This would have been unseemly. They performed for royalty and for one to turn one's back on royalty was absolutely inexcusable. Lully was actually one of the first to serve as a conductor of an orchestra and in the early days this amounted to him standing in front of the orchestra with a large staff in his hand, beating the staff on the floor in time to the music. On 8 January 1687, at one Church of the Feuillants, he was conducting 150 musicians in a performance of his *Te Deum*, celebrating the Kings' recovery from a recent operation. In his conductorial ecstasy, he thrust the staff sharply toward the floor and struck his great toe. An abscess and local gangrene developed. Arrogant as usual, he refused amputation of the toe. He went on to complete gangrene of the limb and loss of his life on 22 March 1687. He was interred in a magnificent tomb that was defaced during the time of the French Revolution but still stands to this day.

Thus, we have symmetrical story; the rise and fall of a scoundrel. Perhaps this was God's judgment on one of his

errant sheep; the punishment, an orthopaedic one. Could an experienced orthopaedic surgeon have saved his life and allowed his musical "reign of terror" to continue? The answer is almost certainly *yes*! Even the meanest resident could perform such an operation, as long as he took care.

It wasn't actually until after the time of the French Revolution that conductors became a routine matter with any orchestra. The Germans call them *obergeneralmusikdirektors*.

Perhaps, although we do not actually know this, the loss of Lully contributed to the modern day, more utilitarian hand held baton. Our collective toes *burn*!

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